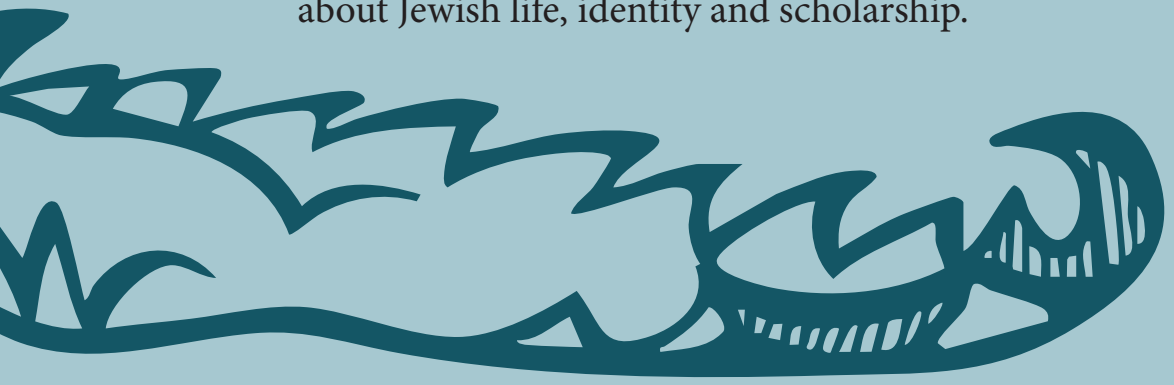
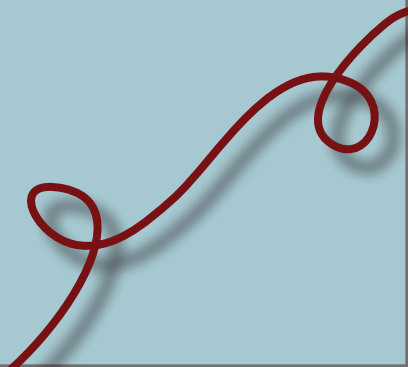
Bereshit
HaTanin Journal

HaTanin Journal

"HaTanin Journal" is a student-run academic journal supported by the Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies. It offers a platform for diverse voices to engage critically with Jewish traditions, culture, history and contemporary issues. By fostering meaningful dialogue and rigorous exploration, "HaTanin Journal" aims to be a cornerstone of Jewish thought leadership at the University of Florida, connecting students, scholars and the wider community in a shared conversation about Jewish life, identity and scholarship.





Welcome to the pages of HaTanin—the Hebrew Alligator!

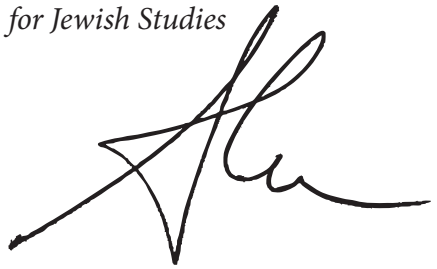
It is my pleasure to invite you to explore the inaugural issue of the "HaTanin Journal." The Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies proudly celebrates the revival of this student-led forum for thoughtful conversations about Jewish history, culture, religion and experience across a wide range of geographies and time periods. In doing so, it builds on the legacy of the Center's earlier newsletter edited by Professor Jack Kugelmass.

We hope that both undergraduate and graduate students will find its contents engaging, illuminating and even surprising. This dynamic new platform welcomes authors and readers from within Jewish Studies as well as those just beginning to discover where Jewish topics intersect with their own academic or personal interests and journeys. In this issue, contributors explore diverse facets of Jewish belonging—a window into research projects, cultural expression and personal explorations.

We are deeply grateful for the work of the editors and authors, and we hope you enjoy the pages ahead.

Crossing fingers for HaTanin!

Dr. Natalia Aleksiun,
Harry Rich Professor of Holocaust Studies/ Eastern European Jewry and Interim Director of the Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies



It feels fitting that "HaTanin Journal" makes its debut now. Like the opening verses of *Bereshit*, this issue is born from both chaos and creation. Our cover evokes that first glimmer of light, reminding us that every new beginning carries the remnants of what came before. The red string, an ancient symbol of protection for the Jewish people, serves as a quiet thread of connection, binding past to present, individual to community and memory to possibility.

"HaTanin Journal" is the University of Florida's student-run Jewish publication supported by the Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies. We aim to provide a platform for diverse voices to engage thoughtfully with Jewish tradition, culture, history and contemporary life. We hope to cultivate a space where questions meet scholarship, where faith meets critique, and where the UF and Jewish communities meet in conversation.

The theme of this first issue, Beginnings and Belongings, feels especially urgent now. In a post–October 7 world, what does it mean to begin again? To return to what is familiar and to reimagine "home" when so much has changed? Within these pages, you'll find writing that explores what it means to belong to a place, memory and community.

As you read, I hope you feel the pull of that red thread, one story at a time. May these works remind you that though suffering shapes us, so too does return. And perhaps most of all, may we carry forward the voices of those who were held, so that their homecoming becomes part of our shared beginning.

Molly Seghi, *Editor-in-Chief*

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When Nothing Means Everything

How the Holy of Holies encapsulates Jewish monotheism

By Rina Rodriguez

One of the most fundamental Jewish beliefs is the concept of a single, eternal, all-knowing God. It is a philosophy shared among all three Abrahamic religions, which, according to a 2020 Pew Research Center report, comprise more than half the world's population. In the United States, even among adults who are not religiously affiliated, 70% of responders said they believe in some concept of a higher power. Note that they do not claim to believe in multiple higher powers, but rather, a single, indefinite force.

Amongst these large statistics, Jews stand at only 0.2% of the global population—a minute representation of those who subscribe to monotheistic ideas. The simple fact is that in today's world, there is no novelty to a shapeless, indefinable God. That is the archetypal God, the Merriam-Webster God, the simple-word-association God. The "Jewish God" is unexclusive and commonplace—and simultaneously, an elegant statement on divine transcendence.

It would be a great mistake to judge the Jewish perception of God based on modern-day sentiments alone. Judaism has survived for centuries and maintained these same beliefs even in a polytheistic-dominated world, long before the term "monotheist" was coined. The Greco-Roman period is a standout example.

In a world of pantheons of specialized gods, the Jewish nation stood out with its single, aniconic God. What made them even more unusual was not only their lack of participation in image-based worship, but their rejection of it as a sacrilegious attempt to quantify God.

This precept that Jews hold is counterintuitive when closely examined. Humans are visual creatures. We keep pictures of our loved ones in wallets, on phones and in offices. In the United Kingdom, it is customary to hang portraits of the reigning monarch in public buildings. The U.S. does similarly with photographs of the president in federal government buildings. An image of God should be the most natural thing, especially when one believes that He is the supreme being of the world. One could argue that it is necessary to forge a tangible connection with Him.

Throughout history, the general Jewish population has grappled with these challenges. In the Book of Exodus, the story of the golden calf began when the Jewish nation requested Aaron to make "a god who shall go before [them]" (Exodus 32:1). It's not a god who surpassed any realm of relatability, but a god they could easily place before themselves, its finitude comfortably within their framework of understanding. The Book of Judges is filled with cyclical stories of the Jewish nation turning to serve local deities before a leader ultimately guided them back to their one God. Something was appealing about these other gods, even if they never gained permanent legitimacy within Judaism.

By the Greco-Roman period, Jews held a strongly anti-image approach to their God, in line with the second commandment prohibiting idols. Tacitus, a Roman historian, recounts in "Histories" that when Roman Emperor Caligula planned to erect a statue of himself in the Second Temple, the Jews immediately organized mass demonstrations and prepared for rebellion.

So strong was the sentiment that an image of another being would be a desecration of their faith. These tensions nearly escalated into war and were only settled with the cancellation of the project following Caligula's death.

Perhaps the best and most consistent representation of this approach is the Holy of Holies, the primary resting place

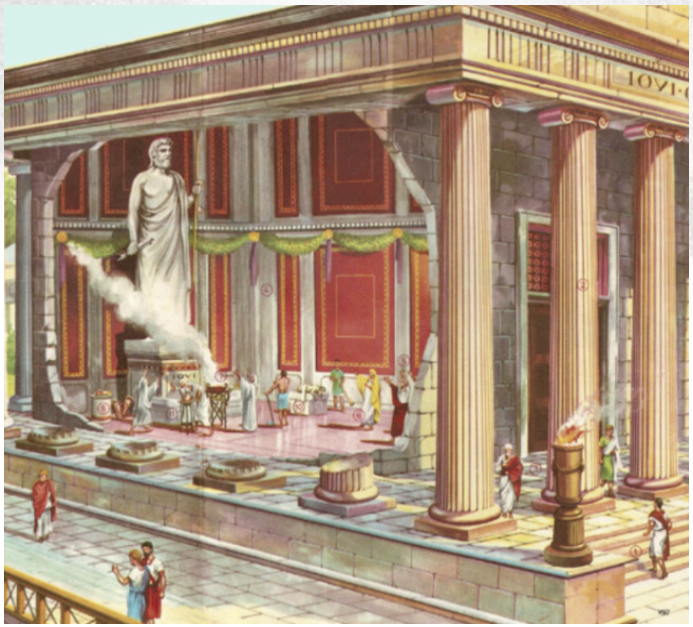


Diagram of offerings being brought into a Roman temple, with a statue of their god as the focal point. (The Worlds of David Darling)

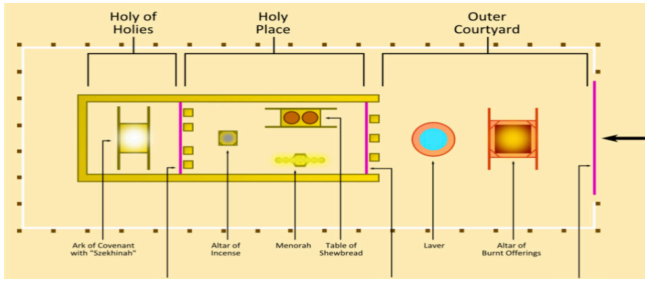


Diagram of the Mikdash, which included the Holy of Holies. While the Ark of the Covenant was present in the First Temple, it was absent from the Second one, which Pompey entered. (Life-Giving Words of Hope & Encouragement/Chaplain Jeff Davis)

of God in Jewish tradition. But when Pompey and his soldiers entered the room, they found no representation of God within. Tacitus writes that since this incident, the impression of the Holy of Holies was "the secret shrine contained nothing." It is worth noting that while the First Temple housed the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, this artifact was absent from the Second Temple. For Pompey and his soldiers, the sanctuary of the Jewish God displayed not even the slightest notion of divinity.

Pompey was not the only Roman to display confusion when faced with the Jews' strange faith. Emperor Julian held more forgiving views, according to Guy Stroumsa's "The Idea of Semitic Monotheism: The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth," maintaining that Jews and Romans "[differed] from one another either not at all or in trivial matters," but still found an outstanding peculiarity in the Jews' worship of a single God. Other criticisms labeled Jews as completely irreligious. Juvenal, in his work "Satires", found them to "worship nothing but the clouds," an attack on their God's substantiality.

Louis H. Feldman, scholar of Hellenistic civilization and ancient Jewish life, found in his article "Origen's "Contra Celsum" and Josephus' "Contra Apionem": The Issue of Jewish Origins" that other pagan writers, including the notorious anti-Jewish grammarian Apion, went so far as to label Jews as atheists. This description seems completely antithetical to Jews and their devotion to God, so it is important to separate this word from its modern connotations.

Rome did not think Jews denied the existence of a higher power, but rather feared their mysterious, undefined God as a threat to social order and an insult to their national identity. Feldman explains that they did not hate heresy so much as an absence of patriotism. To Jews, their contestation of Caligula's statue was a defense of their religion. To the Romans, it was an affront to their emperor's authority, a demeaning insistence on placing a flimsy and absent god before their larger-than-life emperor. Their tendency to self-isolate and refusal to participate in pagan rituals was a rejection of their culture, fostering feelings of distrust and fear among the Roman populace. At the root of it, what Rome could not understand about Jews and their intrinsically seditious religion was the exact bewilderment Pompey and his soldiers encountered in the Holy of Holies: the incorporeality of a single God.

We have already established that the Jewish aniconic God is counterintuitive, was often abandoned in favor of idols and excluded the Jews from the polytheistic world. So what exactly is the appeal that allowed this belief to prevail until today, where it has become the most mainstream notion of God?

Jews found greatness precisely in God's inability to be captured. A god that can be touched with human hands, seen with human eyes and described in human language is unworthy of worship. The limited access to and emptiness of the Holy of Holies was a perfect summation of this perspective. To understand the essence of God is inaccessible to humans, and attempting to represent his infinitude in a finite vessel is impossible.

L.E. Goodman, an American philosopher, points out in his book "God of Abraham" how even Moses, who in Exodus was said to "speak face to face" with God, was unable to see his true form. What Pompey and his soldiers took for simple nothingness was the Jewish state-

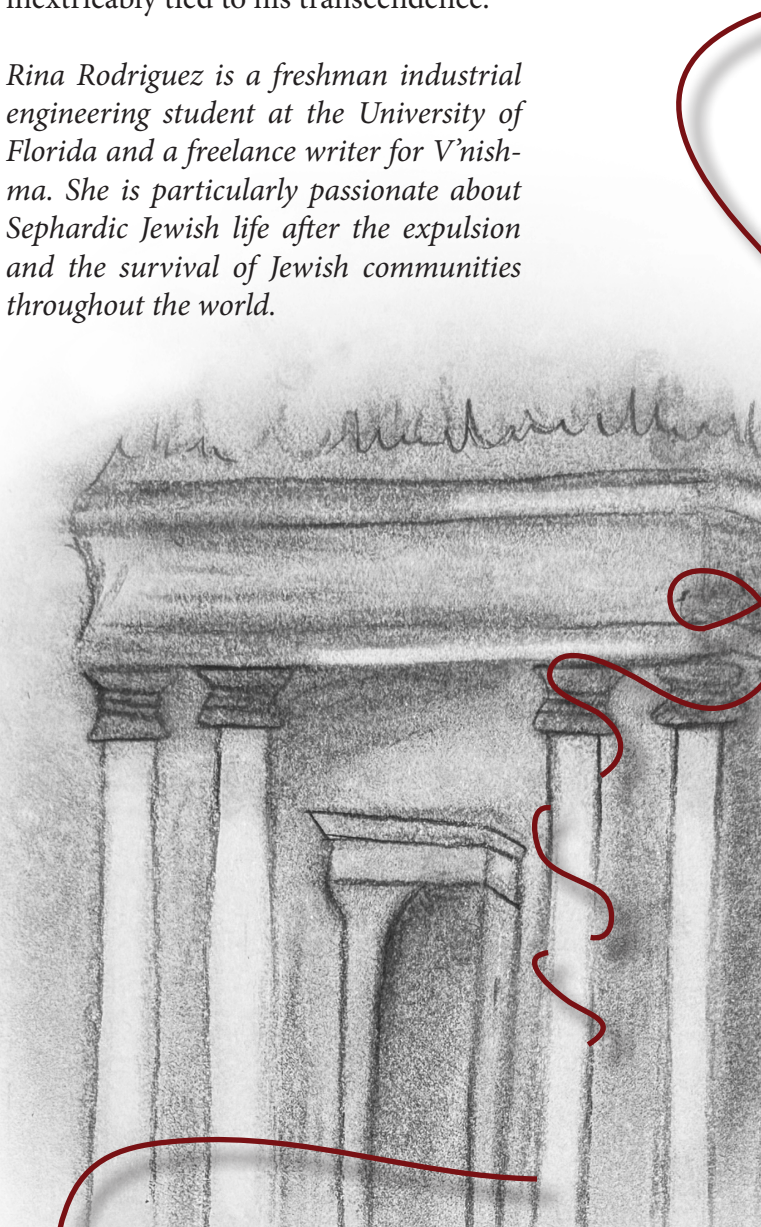
ment that nothing in this world could hold a candle to their God.

This perspective, of course, creates a struggle in how Jews are supposed to understand what it is they worship. Maimonides, a prolific Jewish writer and philosopher, held the opinion that "he who knows God best can see most clearly his transcendence of the predicates used in our common language." Goodman explains this to mean that the closest understanding of God is achieved through acknowledging that it is futile to try to describe him.

That does not mean that attempts are never made. Jewish texts are filled with anthropomorphic descriptions of God meant to demonstrate His relationship with those who follow Him. The prayer Avinu Malkeinu translates to "our father, our king," signifying the duality of His behavior as both a king worthy of respect and a father who demonstrates compassion. In the Torah, He assumes the descriptors of angry, jealous, loving and forgiving as easily as one slips off a coat. For a religion that rejects depictions, Judaism heavily employs imagery. Its prevalence, Goodman found, prompted Maimonides to encourage parents to educate their children from the earliest possible age that God is not a person, despite the use of metaphors in their education. At the root of it, imagery and anthropomorphism are supplements in Jewish theology used to explain the nature of God. God Himself remains fundamentally indefinable.

The increased popularity of monotheism we see today is not because God has suddenly become easier to understand. It is not the factory-setting religious belief, either. The single, aniconic God remains transcendent and incomprehensible. His lack of depiction is not a lack of recognition, but a statement that it is impossible to try to represent God with something that He far surpasses. Today, Jews understand this lack of representation as something that strengthens their relationship with God. Prayer, Torah study and performing mitzvot are traditionally recognized as the primary ways to foster a personal connection to God, none of which require an understanding of His form. Jewish monotheism has survived throughout the political persecutions, fluctuations in faith and conflicting anthropomorphism for one reason. Ultimately, God's worthiness of worship is inextricably tied to his transcendence.

Rina Rodriguez is a freshman industrial engineering student at the University of Florida and a freelance writer for V'nishma. She is particularly passionate about Sephardic Jewish life after the expulsion and the survival of Jewish communities throughout the world.



The Diminishing Returns of Respecting Your Father

A modern retelling of the story of Jacob and Rachel

By Kaily Mermelstein

In a culture where arbitrary factors like the order of birth determined the course of their lives, Jacob and Rachel did not try to change themselves to belong. Rather, they worked around their circumstances and sought the future they knew they deserved. For Jacob, this was securing the firstborn's birthright. For Rachel, this was escaping the home of her idolatrous father. This modern retelling shows that the lessons they learned through their struggles hold today: sometimes the best thing you can do for yourself is to leave and start again somewhere new.

Rachel had been the one to spot him stumbling into her family's cafe while she was taking orders at the cash register. The man was filthy, his sweat-sticky shirt tucked into mud-splattered pants, his glasses smudged beyond visibility. She ran to get her father and got a slap to the head for leaving the shop unattended, then was sent to their apartment on the floor above. Rachel was halfway up the stairs when her dad returned, an arm wrapped around the stranger like they were war buddies, and she paused on the stairs to listen in.

Where did her reclusive father meet a guy like this? The stranger spoke in a mumble, so she could only hear her dad's side of the conversation. He asked about the man's mother, lamented the way they fell out of touch, alluded to "such great times" that Rachel really didn't need to know about, then abruptly cut to business. He told the man that he couldn't house someone for free, and smiled when the man agreed.

A chair scraped against the floor, and Rachel jumped back. "I'll show you where you can get cleaned up," her father continued. "You'll be swimming in my clothes, but they're clean. And I'll set up an air mattress in the storeroom for you." He clapped a hand on the man's shoulder. "Buck up. No one's going to kill you in my house." Rachel thought this was a joke, but the man solemnly nodded.

Rachel rushed towards her room as they started up the stairs, pulling out a book in a frenzy. Sometimes she felt like her household skills were the only reason she was kept around. God knows he had told her enough about how much trouble she gave him compared to what she

was worth. By the time she dared to open her door, the man was down in the storeroom.

Rachel tried to catch him the next day, but she was stuck doing the dishes at the cafe all day, her punishment for her earlier carelessness, and didn't see him at dinner.

"Jacob?" her father asked when she inquired.

"He's still settling in, get off his back."

So his name was Jacob. That was a start.

The next day, all of her skulking paid off. She didn't see Jacob while she manned the counter, and he didn't come to dinner again. But late into the night, after her father and Leah had already gone to bed, she heard a creak downstairs.

When she tiptoed downstairs, his head was ducked behind one of her dad's beat-up books. Jacob turned each page like it was made of tissue, delicately but quickly. He had flipped through five pages by the time he noticed Rachel lurking in the corner.

"Hello," he said softly, shutting the book. His eyes, visible through clean glasses, met hers.

"Oh, um, I didn't mean to interrupt your reading," she said, looking around for an excuse. "I'm just getting a cup of water."

"That's alright. It's not a very good book anyway." He showed her the cover, and it was an outdated drink catalogue.

"Why were you reading it then?"

"I can't fall asleep without reading something first. I thought my books would get damaged if I brought them, but I'm sure I could've carried something under my shirt. They would make a good pillow." His lips twitched, and he looked back down at the catalogue. "I interrupted your drink."

Jacob was chattier than she originally thought; although his voice was hushed, each word followed the one before in a smooth stream.

"I wasn't actually getting a drink," she confessed, inching further into the room. Now that she had him talking all to herself, she didn't want to pass up the opportunity. They never got new people around; he could be an avenue out of there. "Can I sit with you? I'll keep the door open, obviously."

He glanced away from the doorway. "Please," he said, gesturing to the chair beside him. He was in Rachel's usual spot.

"My dad said your name's Jacob," she said, not wanting to bother with a fake introduction.

He replied, "Right. And you're Rachel?"

"How'd you know?"

"Laban mentioned that he has two daughters. One of them knows how to mind her own business, and the other doesn't." His shoulders relaxed when she laughed. "It was an educated guess."

"What can I say? I had to investigate the weirdo who walked in with no introduction."

"I apologize. I had nowhere else to go."
"I thought so. You looked like you'd already been everywhere else." That got a chuckle from him. "Is someone actually

trying to kill you?"

His leg banged against the table. "Most likely," he said tightly. "My brother is very angry with me."

"What did you do?"

"I stole from him." He twisted his beard between his fingers.

"That's it?" she said suspiciously.

"I transferred some money from his bank account to mine." He paused, mulling it over. "A lot of money, to be fair."

"Well, that's nothing to cry about. If my sister were homeless and she stole from me, I wouldn't freak out about it."

"What makes you think I'm homeless?" he asked. She raised an eyebrow. "OK, I see your point. But I didn't steal from him because I needed the money, I did it because he doesn't deserve it."

"Why's that?" she asked, scooting backward an inch, and the squeak of her chair made them both startle.

"Whenever I would ask my father a question," he began, resettling, "he would take the most roundabout way to get to the answer so I would think more deeply about it." He waited for her approval, and she nodded reluctantly.

"Let's imagine you have two sons. Twins, even, but they're nothing alike. One is strong and brutish, and the other is small and quiet. And you love them, and you let them do as they please. So the strong one gets wilder, and the quiet one gets more bookish. And while the strong one is out making trouble, you stay in with the quiet one and learn, just like you used to do with your father." He takes a deep breath. "Why would you love this son less?"

She blinks. "Does he love you less?"

"We're not talking about me right now," he said. "Just answer the question."

"Maybe he reminds me of the parts of myself I dislike."

"Good answer. Let's move past that. You're old, blind, and you're probably-probably dying," and he mumbled something under his breath. A prayer, or a phrase to cast the thought away. "You're not well. And you have two sons, and money to give them. How do you decide who to give what?"

"I'd split it equally," Rachel said.
"You can't do that. Who gets more?"

"My favorite, I guess."

"Right! And shouldn't your favorite be the one who's done everything you asked, who always does what he's supposed to do? Why would you reward the one who's always gone when your other son was right beside you?"
He pulled at his beard, fingers white. "My father has... traditional ideas about birthright. The older son gets the larger share."

"Aren't you-"

"He's four minutes older."

"Ah."

He let his hands relax. "So now we've come back to the main issue. Why did I think I should get the bigger share? And was I right?"

Rachel realized that this long-winded

story wasn't just for her sake, but for his, too. There was a well of anger in him that he could only retrieve bucket by bucket.

"Who's to say?" she said. "Definitely not me."

"I'd accept your judgment," he replied. "I'll be atoning for a long time. But only for lying to my father and leaving him."

"Do you miss him?"

"Every day. But he would never forgive me if he found out what I did. He wouldn't even recognize the person I am now." He polished his glasses on her dad's oversized shirt.

"That could be a good thing. I mean, it sounds like you weren't happy with your relationship with him. Maybe this will fix that."

"Perhaps. I don't know when I can go back, though. Esau will still be hunting me down."

"He can't do that forever. Like, a guy's gotta have other hobbies besides trying to kill his brother," she says playfully.

"You've never met him," he replied, as serious as ever.

"I've met plenty of men with tempers." She flicked her head towards the stairs. "They always cool down eventually."

"It will take years."

"You don't have another choice." She felt too serious all of a sudden and tried to perk back up. "So now that you have all this free time, what will you do?"

"Prepare myself for what comes next," he said. "Make myself worthy of my father's respect. Forgive my brother so I can reunite with him with an open heart."

"And make some coffee?" Rachel asked. Jacob tapped a finger to his chin. "Yes. And make some coffee."

Kaily Mermelstein is a 1PD at the University of Florida College of Pharmacy. When she's not writing stories, she likes reading, crafting and going on walks with her bearded dragon Fred.

The Right, Left and Antisemitism

A Q and A with Dr. James Loeffler about what both sides of the political spectrum are getting wrong about antisemitism

By Aileyahu Shanes

In 2017, white nationalists marched with lit torches at the University of Virginia campus in Charlottesville, VA, shouting, "Jews will not replace us." The event—known as the "Unite the Right" rally—was organized by reported white supremacists and neo-Nazis like Richard Spencer, Jason Kessler and Christopher Cantwell. They claimed to protest the proposed removal of a Robert E. Lee statue from a park named after the Confederate general, but the rally quickly became a catalyst for hate and intimidation.

The "Unite the Right" rally prompted a range of responses by political and university leaders, but many failed to address the problems of antisemitism in the United States. For example, Teresa Sullivan, the president of UVA, condemned the rally as racist, homophobic and misogynistic – yet made no mention of its explicitly antisemitic nature. Similar failures to confront antisemitism resurfaced following the Hamas attacks on Oct. 7, 2023, and the impending Israel-Hamas War. To put this in perspective, the Anti-Defamation League recorded under 2,000 antisemitic incidents in 2017, the year of the march. By 2024, that number had risen to over 9,000.
Dr. James Loeffler, director of the Leonard and Helen R. Stulman Jewish Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University, visited the University of Florida this fall as part of the Forum for Fairness in Discourse lecture series. In his talk, "How Charlottesville Changed America," he explored how antisemitism spreads across the political spectrum and intersects with debates over free speech—offering a sharp, timely look at how hate persists and how society responds.

Loeffler spoke with "HaTanin Journal" editor Aileyahu Shanes to discuss his research and reflect on what recent events reveal about the changing nature of antisemitism since 2017.

You began research about antisemitism and free speech in 2017, the same year as the "Unite the Right" march at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, VA, where you taught. Why was that event such a critical moment for Jews in the United States, and what did you take away from it?

At the time, I taught at UVA and went on to become director of Jewish Studies, so I had a front-row seat. Two things struck me.

First, there was a kind of forgetting about what could have stopped the protest before it turned violent. The weekend began with a torchlight procession using tiki torches through campus. That actually violated a state law written to prevent the KKK from cross-burnings and similar marches. The law had been upheld by the Supreme Court, but no one thought to use it. I was frustrated because it wouldn't have violated free speech. It was a valid law. I wanted to know why no one thought of it, and what else in our legal history we've forgotten that might help balance equal rights and free speech.

Second, even with so much antisemitism in that moment, people didn't know how to talk about it. Even those opposed to racism and hatred often left antisemitism out. On campus, there was a push for unity and tolerance, but antisemitism dropped out of the story. I wanted to understand why, because these people weren't antisemitic; they just didn't know where to put Jews in the story of reckoning with hatred.

What explanations have you found for these things?

Many Americans misunderstood antisemitism. They thought of it only as religious hatred. Since many Jews are seen as white, they didn't fit into conversations about racism. Others associated antisemitism only with the Holocaust or the Middle East. Because Jews were often seen as successful and well-liked in America, people assumed they weren't in danger.

Quickly, antisemitism also became tied up with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the Left, some activists said they wouldn't work on antisemitism unless Jewish students clarified their stance on Israel and Palestine. On the Right, some ignored antisemitism in their own ranks but emphasized it as a prob-

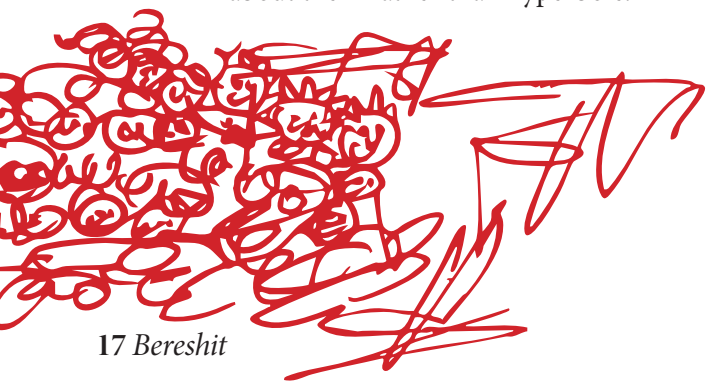
lem on the Left. Politics distracted from an honest discussion of antisemitism.

Within the Jewish community, some see antisemitism on the Left as the main problem, while others focus on the Right, pointing to white supremacy and fascism. How do you respond to this sentiment within Jewish spaces?

It's very polarizing, inside the Jewish community and in American society. There's too much finger-pointing and "whataboutism." We have to move past that.

Any solution has to be comprehensive. We need to acknowledge that antisemitism exists on both the Right and the Left. At the same time, not everything critical of Israel is antisemitic. We shouldn't exaggerate what comes from the side we dislike, nor should we dismiss everything from the side we identify with.

We need clarity about what Jews fear. Is that [fear] the danger of physical assault? Is it being denied equal status and dignity? These are different harms, and we need clarity about them rather than hyperbole.



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In his UF lecture, Loeffler mentioned the categories of exclusion, occlusion and extrusion when referring to how the Left and Right address antisemitism today.

Exclusion refers to only acknowledging the issues of antisemitism in specific contexts. For example, after Oct.7, Loeffler says some on the progressive Left said Jews couldn't be included in social and political movements unless they took a certain stance on Zionism. That excluded Jews from progressive spaces unless they met political criteria.

Occlusion means blocking something out. Before Oct. 7, many university leaders struggled to see where antisemitism fit alongside diversity and equality efforts. For example, after the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally, many statements condemned white supremacy and fascism but didn't mention Jews. It wasn't out of antisemitism, but out of not knowing how Jews fit into the story.
Loeffler describes extrusion as an approach to antisemitism that assigns it far more weight [or disproportionate] than other forms of hatred. For example, on the Right, Loeffler says there is a focus on antisemitism while dialing back other civil rights programs. Leaders spotlight antisemitism but dismiss other forms of discrimination. It becomes the one kind of hatred they emphasize, while ignoring or excusing antisemitism in their own ranks.

"All of these approaches are missing something," Loeffler says. "The goal of these terms is to help us see what's being overlooked and to push everyone—Left, Right and Center—into a more honest conversation."

On extrusion, would you say the Right sometimes uses antisemitism as a distraction from the antisemitism within its own party and leaders?

Yes. Often, it's deflection. A politician might say something offensive about Jews or the Holocaust, but if they're a strong supporter of Israel, allies excuse it. That's irresponsible. Everyone needs to address antisemitism in their own house.

Historically, Jews marched alongside Martin Luther King Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement. Given that history, are you sur-

prised to see today's exclusion of Jews, especially on the Left?

Not entirely. There were real moments of unity in the 1960s, but also tensions: about how far the movement should go about racial identity and about affirmative action. Some Jewish groups supported affirmative action, while others opposed it, and that caused conflict.

What is different today is how politicized antisemitism has become, and how central Israel is to the discussion. In the 1960s, there were debates about Israel, but they weren't at the center. Today, Israel dominates the conversation, often overshadowing antisemitism itself.

Your research also looks at free speech. What should the strategy be for Jews trying to balance protection and the First Amendment while fighting antisemitic hate speech?

The strategy has to begin with a commitment to the rule of law and due process. Protections must be legal and consistent. We shouldn't cut corners to isolate threats.

We need to balance equal protection with free speech. There's more we can do legally: on online hate, anti-doxxing laws and anti-masking laws to prevent intimidation. But whatever we ask for, we must be willing to live with it ourselves if it's applied to others. We can't say, "We're for free speech, but not that protest." At the same time, we can't accept "anything goes." The key is a consistent and legal approach.

Does this require Jews across the political spectrum to bridge divides, especially between Zionist and anti-Zionist Jews?

Yes. We don't have to erase political differences, but we do need to talk across them. History shows deep divisions in Jewish communities, but also moments when they came together in the face of common threats.
We need to do that again, ask what protections we want under the law and accept that they will apply broadly, even in ways that make us uncomfortable.

Finally, you've said you're optimistic for Jewish life in the United States. Why?

There are three reasons:

First, Jewish history is one of resilience and survival. Even in catastrophic times, Jews have endured. That's important to remember when people feel panic or despair.

Second, Jews in America are not the only minority. Unlike in Europe's past, where Jews were often the sole scapegoats, here there are many minorities. That makes the story more complex and creates opportunities for alliances.

Third, America's democratic institutions remain strong. Our civil society is resilient, and our educational institutions, despite their flaws, still aim to prepare leaders to think responsibly about these challenges. That gives me hope.

Ailee Shanes is a graduate student at the University of Florida studying mass communications. He is an award-winning journalist and reporter at WUFT-FM, the NPR member sta-

The Face of a Stereotype

Why the 'Jewish nose' needs to go under the knife

By Molly Seghi

I asked DeepAI to generate an image of a Jew. Each time I hit 'submit,' it would produce some variation of a bearded man with a prominent nose, deep-set wrinkles and tired eyes to match. Donning a black-rimmed hat and a suit, with what appears to be a *tallit*, he stands before a crowd.

An image generated by DeepAI on November 6, 2025, using the prompt: "Jew based on media stereotypes." (Molly Seghi/DeepAI)

For the record, I asked ChatGPT first. We tussled when the robot wouldn't fulfill my request, even after I affirmed I would use the creation for educational purposes. Although it claimed it would not "show or reproduce antisemitic imagery directly," the chatbot did confirm my suspicions: the most common Jewish physical trait reflected in the media is a hooked nose.

Most of my formative years were spent grappling with what constitutes a "Jewish" nose. While I don't possess the frizzy curls and fair skin that my Eastern European ancestors may have, was my striking nose really a telling sign of my origins?

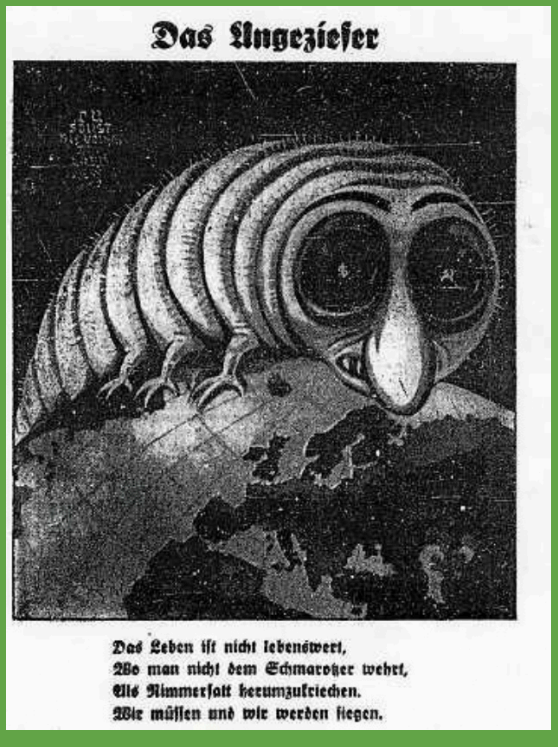
A Roman bust once misidentified in the early 20th century as the Roman-Jewish historian and military leader Flavius Josephus — an attribution based largely on stereotypes about the "Jewish nose." Modern scholarship rejects that identification. The image was scanned from an 1888 copy of Josephus' The Jewish War. (Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek/Wikimedia Commons)

The Jewish nose falls into the category of stereotypes that assign an exaggerated quality with pejorative intention. There is no evidence of Jews portrayed with larger noses before the 12th century, according to historian Sara Lipton. Only later did these features become associated with Jews, she said. The "Jewish nose" was portrayed with various shapes until the 13th century, when it mutated into the hooked form on the face of a bearded Jewish caricature. Ever since, the nose has remained a recognizable attribute of Jewish ethnicity, appearing in portraiture, physiognomical literature, medical writing and other media.

Enamel reliquary casket depicting Jesus nailed to the cross under the direction of Jewish and Gentile executioners, with one of the first visual representations of Jews shown with hooked noses, circa 1170, (country of origin uncertain). (Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York)

According to the American Jewish Committee, the reference to a hooked Jewish nose is still used today, and it perpetuates the antisemitic notion that negative personal qualities are physically manifested. It suggests that an 'ugly' feature mirrors an 'ugly' soul.

Antisemitic propaganda in Nazi Germany depicting capitalist and communist "vermin" in Der StürmerSeptember 1944, a Nazi propaganda newspaper. The translated caption reads: "Vermin. Life is not worth living when one does not resist the parasite, never satisfied as it creeps about. We must and will win." (Reddit)


Das Ungeziefer
Das Leben ist nicht lebenswert,
Wo man nicht dem Schmarotzer wehrt,
Als Nimmersatt herumzukriechen.
Wir müssen und wir werden siegen.

The nose typecasts Jewish people with other undesirables bearing distinct attributes, like warty witches and beady-eyed rats, and is part of a long lineage of physical traits that have been vilified to ground hate against other minorities, like Black skin or Asian eyes. The familiar illustrations of a hooked-nose Jew would typically accompany the worst calumnies aimed at defaming Jews, such as the false and malicious claim of blood libels.

So, is there something inherently biological that makes a certain nose "ethnic"? While it is true that

certain genetic traits are an evolutionary adaptation, the "Jewish nose" is not one of them. Given that Jews reside on all corners of the globe, those from different regions historically have different kinds of noses, specifically adapted to the climate in which they inhabit. And while Jewish genes are a category among other ethnicities that can be traced using DNA, Jewishness is not only determined by blood but also by religious practice and cultural ritual. In other words, a physical feature does not represent Jewishness is not represented and can't automatically be identified as Jewish because a Jew possesses it.

Historically, viewers have assigned meaning to the physical feature, usually within a negative context. By reclaiming ownership of the meaning attributed to that feature, the one who wears it invalidates the derogatory sense of it. As historian and medical ethics professor Sharonna Pearl puts it, believing in the "Jewish nose" myth means "accepting a narrative that is not our own [and] affirming a belief system that situates Jewishness in the body and blood."

The issue of what constitutes Jewish identity is something that has been of particular interest to me, as my paternal grandfather converted to Judaism long before I was born. That fact rarely came up until one summer day in 2024.

Perched on a wooden barstool behind the clutter-filled front desk of a local lake, I caught a glimpse of a red lifeguard shirt approaching me from behind.

"You know, I never noticed your nose until now," my coworker observed. "It looks very Jewish."

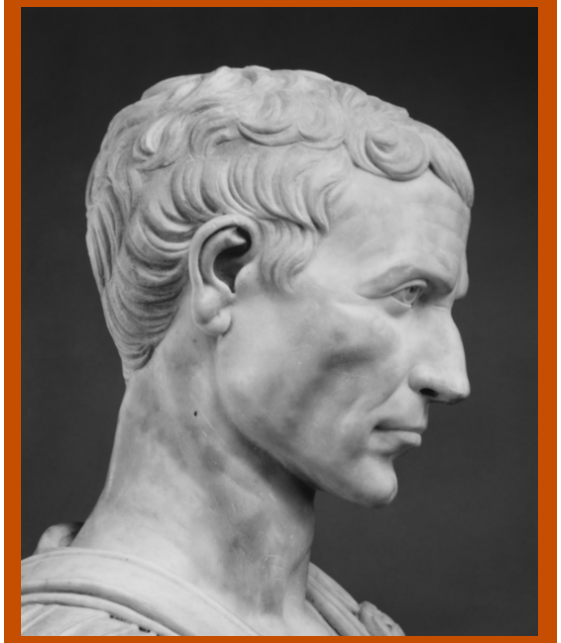
Startled, I took a breath and gave her a strained smile.

"My nose happens to be a gift from my grandfather," I told her. "It's a replica of his."

I then shared that my grandfather was born into an Italian-Catholic family, similar to hers, and that he converted to Judaism.

This brief interaction opened the floodgates to my past recurring ruminations as I overanalyzed my nose based on the perceptions of others. The children who crudely dubbed me "Pinocchio" made me aware that my nose was long. Other comments made me consider its size. But the mere mention of my nose was the worst of all, as it made me realize that my nose was somewhat unusual, something people noticed.

Through some research, I learned that my nose more closely resembles what was historically described as a Roman nose, with a high and remarkable bridge, a downward-curved profile and a well-defined pointed tip. In ancient Rome, this shape was associated with authority and status, with its symbolic and literal prominence represented in sculptures and portraiture.



Bust of Julius Caesar by Andrea di Pietro di Marco Ferrucci, created circa 1512–14, showing a Roman nose. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The largeness of the Roman nose, although similar in form to the "Jewish nose," was prized. The main differences between the two are their labels, the people wearing

those noses and whether the nose is considered a positive trait or a negative one, based on ethnicity. Labels and lineage aside, learning to live with mine in the mirror each day has been a process.

When I was younger, my dad would routinely trace his fingers along the tip of my nose and declare, "Your nose is a perfect Italian ski slope." Yet, despite his flattery and affirmation, I often wished to solve what I perceived as my lengthy problem. I spent hours staring at my nose in the mirror. I flirted with the idea of a "fixed" nose, new face and improved self-esteem for the small price of $10,000.

Although part of me felt guilty and repulsed at the thought of showing a plastic surgeon a reference image of a Hollywood movie star, I wouldn't have been the first, or the last, Jewish person to sit in that chair. I could imagine that an actress herself, with a more famous and expensive surgeon, probably sat in a similar chair at some point in her career.

Historically, according to Unpacked Media, nose-consciousness permeated European Jewish communities by the late 1800s, with rhinoplasty patients hoping to pass as non-Jewish. In the 1890s, cosmetic surgery was embraced as the first modern nose job was performed, according to the Jewish Museum. By the 20th century, physicians termed physical deformities requiring surgery as a "Jewish nose," arguing that fixing such "racial characteristics" could result in improved well-being, a finding presented by Beth Preminger in her article titled "The "Jewish Nose" and Plastic Surgery: Origins and Implications."

The number of Orthodox women undergoing the procedure has been on the rise, according to Dr. Ira Savetsky, a celebrity plastic surgeon. Many young women opt for it before they begin dating in hopes it will improve their prospects, he said.

According to the American Society of Plastic Surgery, although more surgeries are performed for aesthetic purposes, those focused on maintaining cultural characteristics – known as ethnic rhinoplasty – are also increasing annually.

Flaunting an ethnic nose, however, doesn't always mean going under the knife. Barbra Streisand, for example, was a trailblazer in embracing natural beauty, unabashed in refusing cosmetic change. Her choice did not erase the construct, but it complicated it, showing that a nose can be a mark of beauty or a trademark, depending on who's looking.

Barbara Streisand photographed in "Funny Girl" on January 1, 1968. (John Springer Collection/Corbis via Getty Images)

As Jewish representation in media has grown, so has our understanding of Jewish diversity. Who knows? Maybe in ten years, DeepAI's algorithm will reflect that — generating a new face with every refresh.

At least for myself, after all my ambivalence about what my nose represented, I finally reclaimed my right to assign meaning to it. I proudly decorated my prominent nose with a gold hoop and decided I would never get a nose job. After all, my nose fits me better than the stereotype ever did.

Molly Seghi is a junior journalism student at the University of Florida and the editor-in-chief of HaTanin Journal. She always keeps a journal close at hand, filling it with ideas between long runs and kitchen experiments.

From Muscle to Memory: The New Jew and the Physical Rebirth of Jewish Identity

How Jewish athleticism has evolved since the state of Israel's birth

By Adam Poupko

Cloaked in her judo robe, Yael Arad stepped onto the podium as the crowd roared with the Israeli flag raised above her head. Placed around her neck was a silver medal, a reminder that she is among the top three in the world in women's judo. As she accepted the medal and second place in the judo competition at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, she simultaneously achieved a feat of profound national significance. She became the first Israeli athlete to ever stand on the Olympic podium since the establishment of the state of Israel.

Israeli Olympic judoka Yael Arab, right, celebrates and hugs her German opponent Frauke Eickoff after winning the semi-final match at the Barcelona Olympics, on July 30, 1992. (AP Photo)

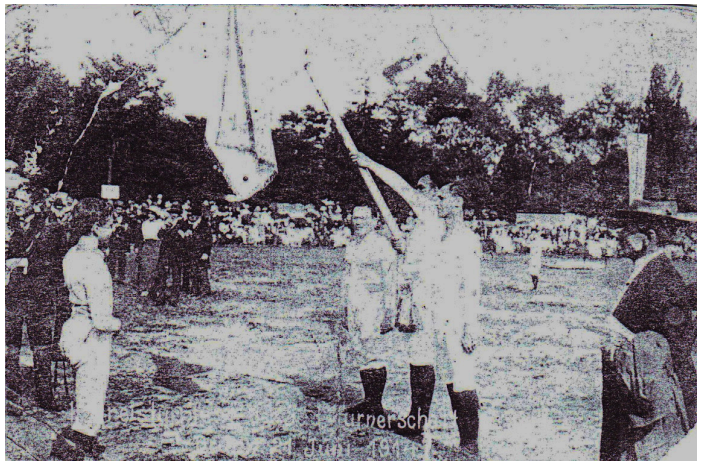
Becoming the first Israeli athlete to win a medal was far from just a personal achievement. It was a gift of purpose for Jewish athletes across the globe, giving them a collective cause they could all compete under: a flag representing their faith. The path to the podium for Arad was a modern culmination of a deliberate, 100-year-old project to physically transform the Jewish identity.

As Jewish populations grew across Europe in the 19th century, they lived among widespread antisemitic stereotypes. Historian Sander Gilman mentions in his book "The Jew's Body" that many European residents viewed the Jews as physically weak, tending to be more bookish and less active in outdoor activities. Gilman notes that Europeans would also often frame Jewish differences using medicalized terms, and believed they exhibited characteristics like pale skin, bad posture and urban existence. Jewish physicians were trying to fight this antisemitic rhetoric at the time, but were met by the constraints imposed by the scientific rhetoric. These European stereotypes were gradually internalized, compelling Jewish communities to re-evaluate their own physical and cultural self-conception. This rhetoric would be unchanged until the Zionist movement established a new vision.

Max Nordau, co-founder of the Zionist movement, believed the source of this crisis was the exile from the land of Is-

rael, as he stated in his speech at the Second Zionist Congress in 1898. Nordau envisioned a Jewish rebirth grounded in strength and health and rooted in the land, coining the term "Muskeljudentum," or Muscular Judaism. A nation that aspires for a land cannot be based on a foundation of weakness, he argued, so the Jewish body needed to become a renewed site of embodying strength, discipline and vitality. This train of thought empowered Jews to believe that they could become more athletic and active in their lives, regardless of the European stereotypes that told them otherwise.

Many Jewish athletic associations were founded worldwide to support the growing recognition of Jewish athletic ability. Movements like Maccabi, established in 1929, cultivated a collective practice of sport, gymnastics and competitions. Others, such as HaShomer and Betar, extended the project to younger generations and broader reaches. Bodily training became linked to the defense of settlements and the preparation for political independence.



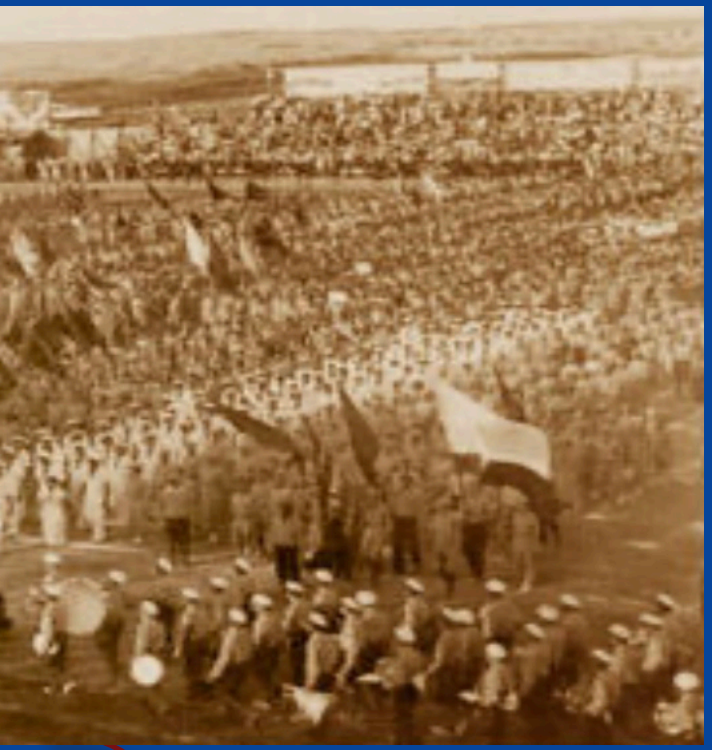
Chairman D.R. Sonnenfeld opened the gymnastics competition in 1919 in Brno, Czech Republic. (Margalit Sonnenfeld)

The evolving image of the diasporic, bookish Jew to the farmer-soldier marked the developing association of Jewish life with sovereignty, labor and strength. Todd Presner, in his book "Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration," argued that the body became a political text, reflecting both the anxieties of modernity and the aspirations that Zionism brought with its idea. As the Jewish people strengthened their muscles, they simultaneously built a better future for themselves.

With Muskeljudentum providing the blueprint for this new identity, sport became the most visible embodiment of it. In the context of Zionism, athletics were not just a fun activity. It was a civic ritual, a public performance with symbolic enactments of nationalism. Within the kibbutzim, in schools and later in military training, the structured physical activity laid the foundation of a body that mirrored the aspirations of the emerging state. It was a civic religion that instilled habits of strength, collectivity and endurance for the next generation of Jews.

Delegates from different countries attend the opening ceremony for the first Maccabiah Games in 1932. (Israel State Archives)

The new ethos became amplified through the visual sphere. Posters, photographs and early state propaganda consistently celebrated athletic figures, illustrating strong and sunlit bodies that worked the land by day and marched in formation by night. The Maccabiah Games, established in 1932, were a notable example



of organized competition that presented this new idea as an effort to represent Israel on a global stage.

They encapsulated the zeitgeist of the New Jew: Jewish athletes from around the world coming together to display physical abilities that symbolized unity and sovereignty.

Although revolutionary, the embodiment of the New Jew could be viewed as performative, for it was a deeply gendered expression of nationhood. The figures that dominated the posters and the people who filled the parades were almost always male. While most women participated in physical labor and collective life, they were often framed at the time as supporters rather than as athletic subjects, and their bodies were seen within the context of motherhood or agriculture. Despite the masculine prototype, the Zionist roots of the New Jew crafted a modern identity for Jews that was rooted in strength and belonging that applied to everyone, regardless of gender.

Today, many of these foundations have changed. Israel's economy and daily life are now shaped more by technology startups than by tractors. This shift toward technology-based work raises questions about the continuing relevance of the New Jew ideal, as Israel has moved toward a model of strength defined more by innovation than by agricultural labor.

Few areas of Israeli life reflect the original archetype, but the athleticism associated with military service remains a notable exception. The act of serving carries a social prestige among Israelis, and male combat soldiers often represent the masculine image that was once tied to labor and sport in the early days of Zionism. However, many groups, including Mizrahi Jews and women, are pushing the margins in the Zionist narrative, challenging the meanings of belonging in Eurocentric, male-dominated spheres. Existing within the systems predominated by masculine ideals, they diversify the modern interpretation of what Jewish athletics represents. The ideal of the New Jew has not been abandoned for a completely different vision. It has been reinterpreted, more contested and more plural than it was in its original form.

Today, Jewish athletes are reaching new heights in the world of sports, ranking among the top competitors globally. In the NBA, Deni Avdija is making waves as the leading scorer for the Portland Trail Blazers, while here in Gainesville, the Gators' men's basketball team, under Jewish and Israeli head coach Todd Golden, captured a historic national title this past season. Jews have established a significant footprint across the sports world, a feat that seemed impossible decades ago. The future for Jewish athletes is at an all-time high and is expected to continue growing.

Adam Poupko is a junior journalism student at the University of Florida and a student assistant at the Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies. He is a huge sports fanatic obsessed with basketball and the San Antonio Spurs, who is looking to make a name for himself in the sports writing industry as a Texan-Israeli.

Mastering the Art of Asking and Listening

A reflection on trust and the work of oral history

By Agnieszka Ilwicka-Karuna

Oral history is the most intimate way of working with primary sources that I have encountered. I have always been drawn to people's stories, but I began conducting formal interviews as a Field Fellow for the Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project. From Yiddish scholars and artists to native speakers and students, I recorded conversations across five countries and in three languages: Yiddish, English and Polish.

Over the last two years, my work has continued at the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, where I have interviewed veterans of World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War — and, whenever possible, their spouses. Each interview, regardless of language or context, has taught me something new about the human need to share and to be heard.

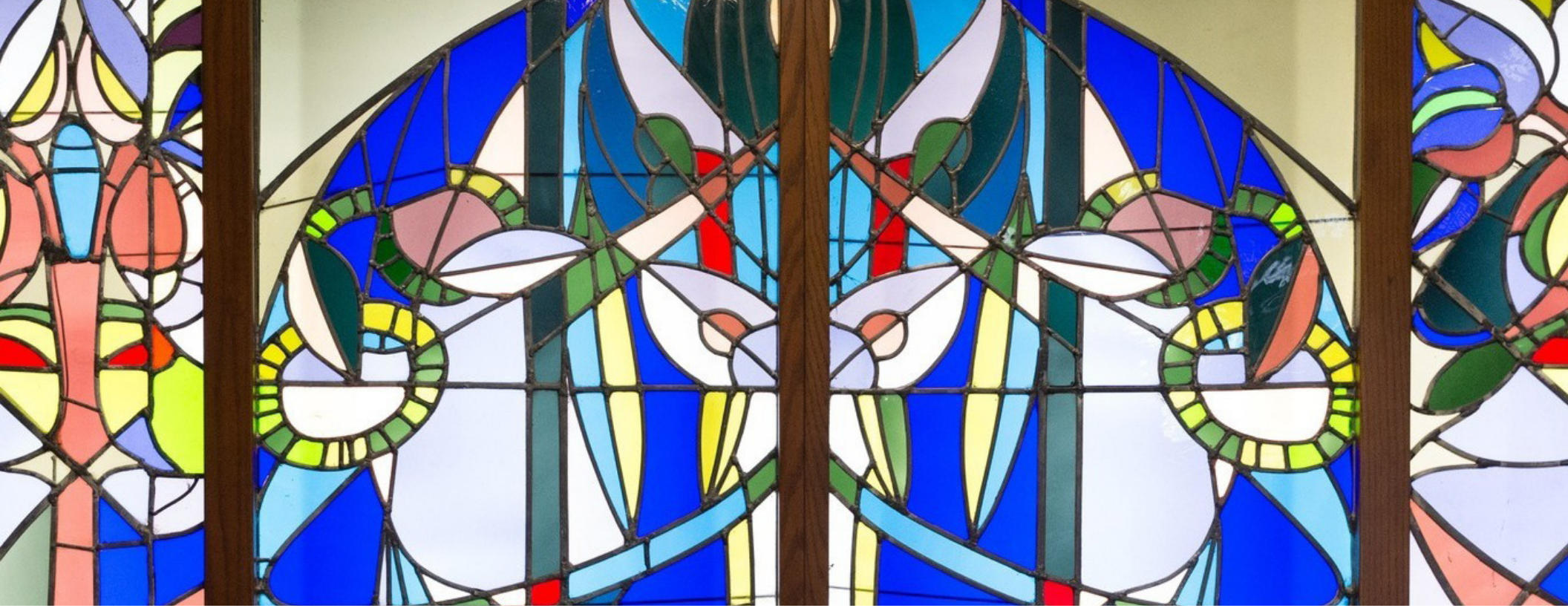
One lesson rises above the rest: a great interview depends on trust. Even the sharpest question falls flat without it or feels intrusive. I have learned to approach each conversation with the intention of listening and creating a space where people feel safe enough to speak from the heart. Skills in oral history are developed from various sources: practice, conferences and mentors. One of the most important sources has been simply watching interviews.

As a doctoral student of Jewish history, I draw deeply from the world's great oral history collections. The University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, with its 55,000 survivor testimonies, remains one of the most powerful tools for understanding Jewish life before, during and after the Holocaust.

Today, I am building my own archive of interviews on Jewish life in postwar Poland. This feels like a race against time — the last moment to record voices that still carry memories of surviving the Holocaust, rebuilding family life and navigating the complicated terrain of the postwar decades. Before each interview, I do everything I can to understand the narrator's story. Once the recording starts, my priority is to listen. Each conversation is a moment of deep trust, a gift of personal memory shared first with me and then with a broader public.

Agnieszka (Aga) Ilwicka-Karuna is a PhD candidate in Jewish Studies at the History Department of the University of Florida. Her work focuses primarily on post-war migration, language, women's and children's history, memory, politics, philanthropy and last but not least, oral history. Aga graduated from the Jewish Studies program at the University of Southampton with a Master of Research. She holds a Master of Arts and a BA in Humanities from the University of Wrocław.

Henry (Hershl Tzvi) Estreicher, Holocaust survivor from Myszkow, Poland, was interviewed by Agnieszka Ilwicka-Karuna on Feb. 16, 2020, in San Jose, CA. (Photo courtesy of Aga Ilwicka-Karuna).



A New Name and a New Beginning

Shaping the Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies

By Joelle Carmel

As you enter the Judaica Suite on the second floor of Smathers Library, you are swept into a magical space. Designed by renowned architect Kenneth Treister, the building holds the special collections of the Isser and Rae Price Library. The wooden windows, carved with Stars of David, bring in the soft glow of sunlight, illuminating the room filled with beautiful furniture. The shelves house hundreds of historical Jewish books, foundational religious texts and scholarly studies that connect you to the past.

The Isser and Rae Price Library of Judaica is considered the foremost Jewish studies research collection in the southeastern United States, and the largest Jewish library in Florida, with holdings of over 120,000 volumes and more than 250,000 digitized pages. The growth of this invaluable collection since 1977 mirrors the expansion of Jewish studies

at the University of Florida. The Center for Jewish Studies was established a few years earlier, in 1973, to encourage and support the growing interest in Jewish Studies among UF students.

Exactly fifty years later, under the leadership of Professor Norman J. W. Goda, the Norman and Irma Braman Professor of Holocaust Studies, it became the "Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies." Its eponym, Samuel R. "Bud" Shorstein, a successful accountant and Governor Bob Graham's chief of staff in the Senate, believes in the mission of increasing access to Jewish education and programming on college campuses, especially at his alma mater. Bud Shorstein's support has enabled new research initiatives to be possible and has allowed students to explore new areas of Jewish studies.

"HaTanin Journal" spoke with Shorstein, who shared his belief in the importance of expanding access to Jewish education and programming on college campuses, a mission that continues to guide the Center's work today.

"I'm hoping that the Center for Jewish Studies at the university will become one of the leading centers for Jewish studies in the United States of America," Shorstein said. "I think we are heading in that direction".

The University of Florida is home to the largest undergraduate Jewish student body of any college in the country, according to Hillel International, with 19% of its students identifying as Jewish. Shorstein sees this as a unique opportunity. He hopes to see students of all faiths and backgrounds engage with the Center, "we are interrelating with what I hope to be the future leaders of our state and country." He stresses how important it was for them to have an opportunity, "to develop a relationship with the Jewish people."

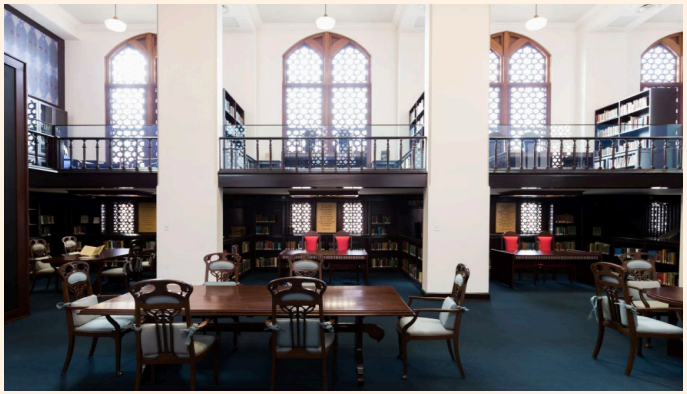
Bud Shorstein pictured at a public talk, Pugh Hall. (Michel Thomas/ UF Liberal Arts and Sciences News site)

Most recently, the world was struggling to make sense of the conflict in Israel, an event that deeply affected the global Jewish community.

"Jewish people in America and worldwide are at a point we haven't been in for years and years," Shorstein said. "Antisemitism has creeped up again, and it is certainly a very serious problem."

In this climate, creating a space for informed and respectful dialogue is crucial, and the Center's faculty stepped in to meet that need.

"The scholars are a very impressive group of people, and they're in demand around the country and around the world," Shorstein said. "This is one of the things we should be very proud of."



The Judaica Suite main hall (Bernard Brzezinski and Hannah Pietrick/ UF Judaica Suite website)

Interim director, Dr. Natalia Aleksiun (Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies website)

A New Director

The Bud Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies, in its new home at Walker Hall, has recently welcomed its new interim director, Professor Natalia Aleksiun, Harry Rich Professor of Holocaust Studies. A historian of modern Jewish history, she is interested in several aspects of Jewish life, especially in the experience of the Jewish intelligentsia, the new university-educated Jewish elite emerging in East Central Europe in the late 19th century and Jewish childhood and adolescence in the first half of the 20th century. Aleksiun also works on anti-Jewish violence and political mobilization before the Holocaust, particularly in university settings.

Aleksiun's two monographs focus on the history of Polish Jewry. Her first book, "Where to? The Zionist Movement in Poland, 1944–1950," examines the political choices facing Holocaust survivors in the immediate postwar years. Her second, "Conscious History: Polish Jewish Historians before the Holocaust," illuminates a cohort of Jewish scholars—both men and women—deeply committed to documenting their own past. She is currently at work on a new book exploring the experiences of Jews in hiding in western Ukraine during the Holocaust. "I believe it is a period that needs to be studied as part of Jewish history rather than examined primarily through the lens of perpetrators," she said. In the spring semester, she will be teaching the introductory course, History of the Holocaust.

Aleksiun continues to work in the field of "aftermath studies," a relatively new area of Holocaust studies that examines the experiences of survivors after the Second World War as they sought to rebuild their lives—sometimes in their old homes, but more often in new ones. She is currently writing an article on the relationships between survivors and their rescuers in Poland in the immediate postwar period.

When asked about her plans for the Center's future, Dr. Aleksiun said she envisions an academic community thriving with programs and ideas.

"The goal of the Center is to be part of many conversations on and off campus and be a resource for students with interest in Jewish topics," Aleksiun said.

She hopes that the Center will continue to collaborate with other university units and Jewish institutions and organizations in the area, such as Chabad UF, UF Hillel and Congregation B'nai Israel.

The Center invites many speakers to engage UF students and faculty in conversations about Jewish history, religion, thought and culture. Most recently, they partnered with UF Chabad for the "How Charlottesville Changed America" lecture delivered by Professor James Loeffler of Johns Hopkins University to kick off this year's events of the Forum for Fairness in Discourse. In January, the Center is holding the second event of the

Forum, a lecture by Richard Breitman titled "What FDR Said about the Holocaust."

"Through the Center, students could learn things that are not necessarily directly connected to their majors, but in some way also enrich their understanding of the Jewish experience," Aleksiun said.

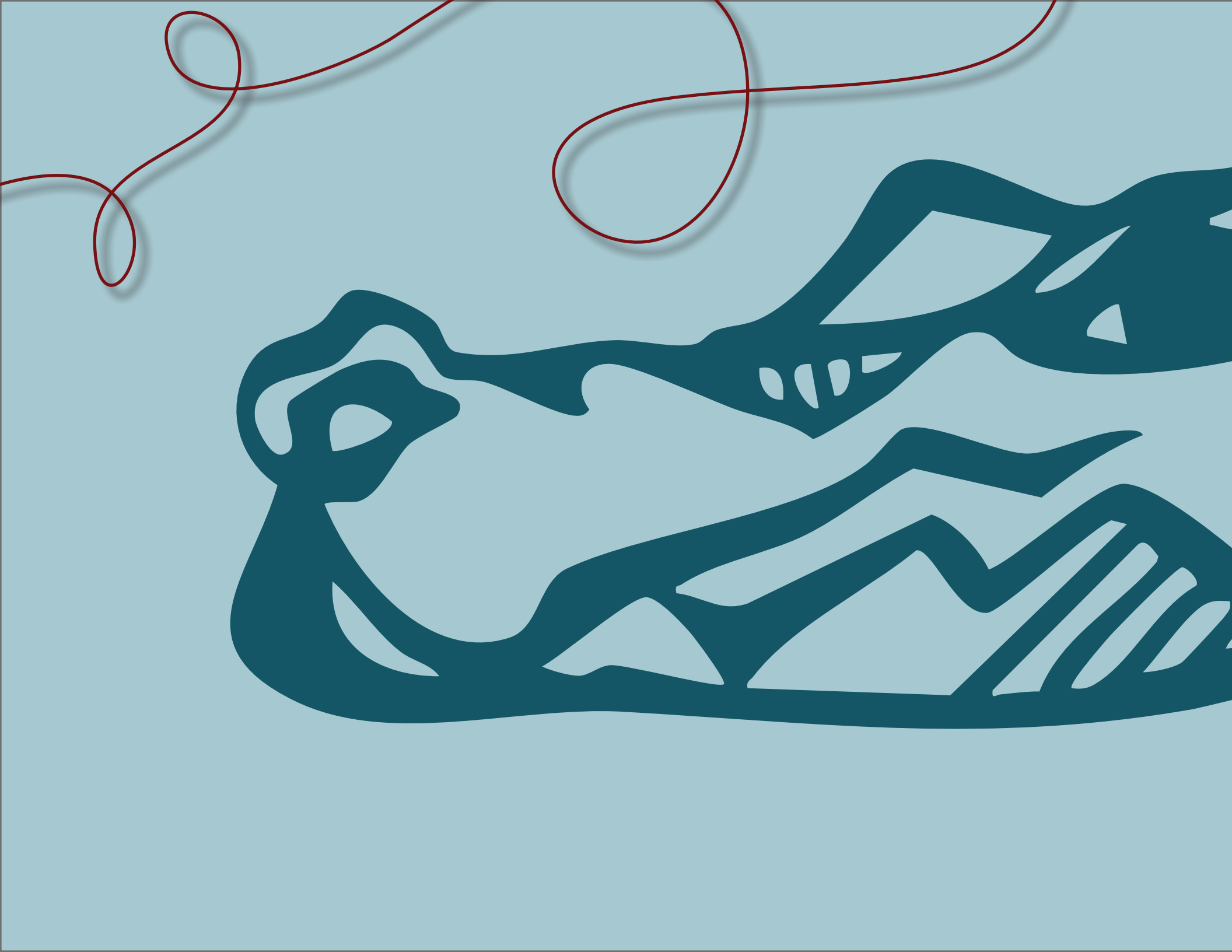
Since its naming, the Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies has continued to expand, offering a wide range of learning opportunities for students interested in Jewish history and culture. The Center also provides research opportunities and scholarships open to students of any major. At the heart of this mission is a simple belief: every student matters.

"The Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies tells the story of the Jewish people," Shorstein said. "We have a good story. I hope students will come away knowing significantly more about the Jewish experience than before they started."

Joelle Carmel is a sophomore psychology and criminology student at the University of Florida. She is passionate about music, baking, nature and being involved in Jewish life on campus.

"The Shorstein Center for Jewish Studies tells the story of the Jewish people."

Samuel R. "Bud" Shorstein



Thank You

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